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Popular Visual Images and the (Mis)Reading of Black Male Youth: a case for racial literacy in urban preservice teacher education

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Popular Visual Images and the (Mis)Reading of Black Male Youth: a case for racial literacy in urban preservice teacher education

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In the majority of public schools across the nation, Black male youth are undergoing what can be deemed as "educational genocide" – the killing off of any chances for an equitable education. This dramatically decreases opportunities for Black male youth to develop into fully participating citizens in a democratic society. In many ways, race is the silent killer because it is frequently masked. Preservice teachers often take their cue for how to treat Black male students from existing stereotypes about Black males and media representations of them. In this article, we argue for the development of racial literacy in preservice teacher education programs as a pedagogical method to mitigate the misreading of Black male students in teacher candidates' fieldwork experiences and subsequently in their future classrooms. Our argument operates from the premise that in a time when diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion are more widely recognized than ever before, the notion of race, and popular education films that depict race, still influence how teacher candidates view Black male students, and race remains a predictor for how these students experience school.

Keywords: racial literacy; urban youth; race and education; urban teacher education; Black youth; teacher education and film

Introduction

There is a dire need to move the public conversation about Black male youth beyond the language of the achievement gap and how they are not performing as well as their White and Asian peers in public schools. The suggestion of many scholars (Banks, 2007; Gay, 2010; Goodwin, 1994; Grant & Sleeter, 2011; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2011; Sleeter, 2001) is to focus on teacher preparation. As teacher educators, we have witnessed the ways in which a teacher's preservice education helps to put them on the "right side" of teaching Black male students. Although many narratives offer prototypes for successfully teaching Black male youth in our schools (Bondy & Ross, 1998; Duncan, 2002; Foster, 1998; Lynn, 2006), these models for achievement, while valuable, have not spread in ways that suggest traction and sustainability. While we know that teachers cannot and do not work alone when student achievement is involved, we do believe in the

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power of teachers and the programs in which they study to rupture the status quo and change the narrative that is currently circulating about Black male students: they are uneducable, disinterested in schools, and likely headed for failure (Hopkins, 1997; Knaus, 2007).

In this article, we interrogate some ways in which Black male youth are represented and misread in schools and society based on the media of film, and the ways in which these popular visual images influence preservice teachers' understanding of and attitudes toward Black male youth. We theorize how teacher preparation programs can challenge these misreadings and misunderstandings by developing the racial literacy of their teacher education candidates. By misreading, we mean the application of a belief, conscious or unconscious, to Black men and youth, which draws from common narratives that have plagued these groups from their arrival to America to the present day. The use of the descriptive term "Black", as in "Black male" or "Black youth", refers to people of African ancestry. Similarly, the use of the term "of color", as in "students of color" refers to people who are Black, Latino/a, or Asian and have darker skin than those considered White. The term African-American refers to Americans of African ancestry.

Structure of this article

Our research and purpose for writing this article were guided by the following questions:

(1) How do popular visual images, particularly films about urban schools, influence preservice teachers' attitudes toward Black male students?
(2) How can developing racial literacy in preservice teachers potentially affect these attitudes toward Black male youth?

To explore these questions, we first examine the racial divide between White teachers and students of color, particularly Black male youth, and discuss the influence of popular visual images in potentially maintaining this divide. We then present what we consider a cinematic counter-narrative to a series of popular Hollywood films about urban schools, and we discuss the ways in which the responses of preservice teachers to a documentary about two Black male youth suggest the need for racial literacy in teacher education. As we search for solutions to the dilemma of the racial divide in preservice teacher education, we offer a rationalization for using racial literacy as a tool to bridge this divide between White teachers and their students of color.

We offer a correlation and connection between the influence of media and the teaching of students of color, particularly when the teachers are in preservice and the students are young Black men. We argue that viewing young Black men through the lens of the media represents a misreading of who they are as individuals and as students (Staples, 2008, 2012; Staples & Troutman, 2010), and we posit that this misreading carries over into how these students are treated in classrooms, and often leads to them being kicked out of classrooms and into a school-to-prison pipeline.

In the final section of this article, *After Building Racial Literacy, What's Next?*, we suggest practical ways for integrating racial literacy into everyday teaching practices, and going beyond anti-racist teaching approaches to practices that sustain equitable and humanistic treatment of students. Throughout the article, we weave in our original research conducted with preservice teachers at both of our academic institutions.

The racial divide in teacher education

Ladson-Billings (2005) reminds us that "Nationwide about 88% of teachers are White and in some areas that figure soars as high as 99%" (p. 229). She calls attention to the fact that most White teachers were educated by White college professors in primarily White colleges and universities. She writes:

> Our teacher education programs are filled with White, middle-class monolingual female students who will have the responsibility of teaching in school communities serving students who are culturally, linguistically, ethnically, racially, and economically different from them…. However, much of the literature on diversity is silent on cultural homogeneity of the teacher education faculty. Teacher educators are overwhelmingly white (Grant & Gillette, 1987) and their positions as college and university-level faculty place them much further away from the realities of urban classrooms and communities serving students and families of color. (p. 230)

The consequences of this kind of disparity are staggering, particularly in places where little effort is made to bring more faculty of color into the academy, and where little is being done to address racial disparities in the content or fieldwork aspects of preservice teacher education programs. The racial divide in teacher education (Tatum, 2008) surfaces when programs, whenever possible, avoid placing students in settings where Black students predominate, and every reason except race is given as an explanation. This divide will persist as long as program candidates who are afraid to travel to communities of color are not given the opportunity to discuss their fears and to confront the stereotypes they hold about communities of color and the Black males who live in these communities. When there is silence around the placements that *are not* assigned, programs send a message that communities of color are to be avoided and that the students in these communities are not important to teach or learn from.

The cultural and racial differences between most White teachers and their students of color in urban schools, and the possible lack of interaction between preservice teachers and their future students of color, may lead these teachers to rely on the media, including popular and easily accessible visual images like movies, to learn about students who do not share their racial and cultural backgrounds. In a review of several studies, Wideen et al. (1998) found that the typical teacher education candidate in the United States and Canada was White, female, lower- or middle-class, and from rural or suburban areas. In an analysis of 153 teacher statements, Avery and Walker (1993) reported that most teachers shared a measure of intractability in feeling they could not effectively communicate with students from cultural backgrounds that differed from their own. These researchers also asserted that teacher education programs had done a poor job in preparing their students to examine their assumptions, understandings, and perceptions of as well as expectations for children of color.

When preservice teachers are allowed to remain uninformed about the cultures of their future students, and the role of race and racism is not discussed constructively in preservice courses, teacher education programs become complicit in producing another generation of teachers who will fail to recognize how stereotypes fuel their "understanding" of students of color in general, and Black male students in particular. The end result is missed opportunities for future classroom teachers to learn about and appreciate the identities of their Black male students and become educated about the complex ways in which race (and gender and class) intersect

with educational equity and affect the schooling experiences of Black male youth. For example, many preservice teachers enter their programs holding steadfast to a color-blind ideology (Roman, 1997; Sleeter, 1996). They view "not seeing color" as a badge of honor when it comes to interactions with their students. This kind of thinking suggests a "dysconscious racism" (King, 1991) that divides them from the students they meet in their fieldwork placements and later in their own classrooms when they become teachers. Color blindness attached to a belief that "affirming cultural difference is tantamount to racial separatism, that diversity threatens national unity, or that social inequity originates from sociocultural deficits and not with unequal outcomes that are inherent in our socially stratified society" (p. 133).

Most preservice teachers who practice or aspire to a color-blind ideology are often immersed in the sense of normalcy and privilege that their "Whiteness" affords. The experiences and communication patterns of Whites are taken as the norm by which others are marked or measured (Sleeter, 1996). Ladson-Billings (2001) notes, "the average white teacher has no idea what it feels like to be a numerical or political minority in the classroom. The pervasiveness of whiteness makes the experience of most teachers an accepted norm" (p. 81). Unless teachers "connect the dots" and address the racial divide that permeates many teacher education programs in America, the divide will continue to negatively impact future teachers. Tatum (2008) argues that teacher preparation programs must help candidates "see how unexamined racial attitudes can negatively impact student performance, and how a willingness to break the silence about the impact of race in schools as part of a program of antiracist professional development can improve achievement" (p. 39). It has also been strongly suggested that programs increase diversity among their faculty as a way to invite different perspectives on teaching Black male students (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2005). Without facing the issues of race and racism head on, and taking steps to hire more faculty of color into teacher education programs, preservice programs may prove culpable of turning out teachers who lack the adequate experience, knowledge or heart to work effectively with Black male students. Without meaning to, many preservice teachers negatively interpret the culture and behaviors of Black male students. The display of negative attitudes toward Black male students in popular visual images also affects the dispositions of teachers and their interactions with their Black male students. It is important to note that the perception of the Black male, as he exists in the collective mindset, is a socially constructed abstraction. Many Black males have not been allowed to fully develop their potential and go beyond the stereotypes that exist about them – that of being lazy, violent, and disengaged from learning. Ladson-Billings (1997) points out that poor school success by African-American students can be tied to many factors, one of which is a teacher's disposition toward students, low expectations of them, and subsequent down-tracking. She explains that some teachers let their "perception of African-American students interfere with their ability to be effective teachers for them … And if the teacher has low expectations, the place the teacher believes the students 'fit into' is on society's lower rung" (p. 22).

Many Black youth, and male youth in particular, do not have experiences in their classrooms that validate their varied and complex existence. In their daily interactions, they are denied the social mirrors needed to see themselves as part of the larger American community. An example of this is given in Willis' (1995) essay "Reading the World of School Literacy: Contextualizing the Experience of a Young,

African-American Male." Willis points to the need for Black male youth to see themselves in the classroom:

> A striking example of a teacher's unintentional disregard for the cultural history, understanding, experiences and voice of a student occurred when my oldest son struggled to meet the requirements of a national essay contest entitled, "What it means to be an American." One of the contest's restrictions was that students should not mention the concept of race. My son thought this was an unfair and impossible task to complete, since his African-American identity is synonymous with his being American. (p. 32)

A lack of understanding who students are and an insensitivity to cultural differences can become evident in overt actions like requesting students of color not to write about race even though they would like to, or worse, displaying disdain for their racial identities through demeaning comments. Preservice teachers must to be taught to encourage Black males to create their own worlds and to explore who they are (Staples, 2008, 2012; Staples & Troutman, 2010). In many ways, preservice teachers are the social conduits connecting the lives of their students to the world around them, helping them to contextualize experiences beyond the self. Indeed, negative attitudes of teachers affect the lives of their Black male students. Shannon (1992) addresses the issue of self-fulfilling prophecies as they relate to African-American children. He cites the well-known Rist (1977) study on understanding the processes of schooling and suggests that some teachers respond to their students based upon pre-formed impressions of their appearance or cultural background. We have argued that these impressions, at least in part, are fueled by popular visual images of children of color. In characterizing this behavior, Shannon (1992) invokes a self-fulfilling prophecy scenario: (a) teachers expect different specific behaviors and achievements from particular students; (b) because of these different expectations, they behave differently toward various students; (c) in turn, this different treatment sends different messages to students which affect their achievement, motivation, and self concept; therefore, (d) over time, teacher actions shape students' behavior and teachers' initial expectations are met (p. 30). Evidence suggests that due to disparate cultural experiences, many beginning teachers have little knowledge of the cultural experiences of the children they often go on to teach (Fordham, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2001). However, research also suggests that the cross-cultural connections preservice teachers make with students have a powerful impact on them and their students in their fieldwork experiences (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Seidl, 2007; York, 1997).

Racial literacy in preservice teacher education

Several scholars have written about the discomfort many White preservice teachers experience with teaching students of color (Cochran-Smith, 2004; McIntyre, 1997; Tatum, 1997), particularly male students of color in urban schools. Often this discomfort is expressed in the form of "color blindness". These preservice teachers denied the salience of race by adopting a color-blind approach and viewed the experiences of students of color as if they were White ethnic immigrants who would eventually assimilate into mainstream society (Johnson, 2002). The end result of this "Pedagogy of Discomfort" (Boler & Zembylas, 2002) is a diminishing of the social make-up of the present and future students of color with whom these future teachers will interact.

As defined in this article, racial literacy is a skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race (Omi & Winant, 1986), probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotypes. Scholars of racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz, 2012, 2013; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011; Skerret, 2011; Rogers & Mosely, 2006) offer approaches to developing racial literacy in ways that move an individual or group of individuals toward constructive conversations about race and anti-racist action in schools. Embedded in the concept of racial literacy is the significance of opening and sustaining dialog about race and the racist acts we witness in our school and home communities, and society writ-large. Racial literacy urges educators to take a close look at an institutionalized system like school and examine it for the ways in which its structure affects students of color. Educators who develop racial literacy are able to discuss with their students and with each other the implications of race and the negative effects of racism in ways that can potentially transform their teaching. Racially literate teachers are able to distinguish between real and perceived barriers in their classroom that may be linked to institutionalized systems that govern schools and society. These teachers also develop an ability to resist labeling students as "at-risk" based on race and social status and are more likely to view racialized students as "at-promise" who need and deserve increased educational opportunities (Milner, 2010). Two specific outcomes of racial literacy in a historically racist society like America are for members of the dominant racial category to adopt an anti-racist stance (Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond – Undoing Racism) and for persons of color to resist a victim stance (Gilroy, 1990). In practice, racial literacy allows preservice teachers to examine, discuss, challenge, and take anti-racist action in situations that involve acts of racism.

Developing the racial literacy of all teachers, but specifically preservice teachers who will teach Black male youth is significant. According to a 2010 report by The Council of Great City Schools, Black male youth in 65 of the largest American school districts make up, on average, 17% of the public school population, ranging from 2.1 to 49% (pp. 9, 13). Preservice teacher education programs are critical sites for foregrounding the discussion of race and problematizing the ways in which Black male students' social and academic behaviors are misread. At its best, the preservice experience allows preservice educators to practice an integrative and holistic pedagogy, incorporating the most effective methodological and instructional practices into their teaching. Effective teacher education programs allow for rich clinical experiences where students are able to hone their craft in ways that address complex issues under the tutelage of seasoned professionals. Once in service, the occasional professional development experiences are often "one-shot" skill-based exercises that are disconnected from the integrative complexities of culture and society. Teacher education candidates who receive an education that adequately prepares them for the challenges they will encounter in the classroom and builds their self-confidence and self-efficacy, stay in the profession longer (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002). Preservice programs, as argued by Latham and Vogt (2007),

> better equip students to persist in teaching. Teacher education programs that diminish the gap between theory and practice provide extensive experience in schools that immerse preservice teachers in the school climate have the potential to prepare new teachers entering the field for the challenges they face (p. 154).

With these unique features and possibilities for learning, preservice teacher education programs have the *potential* to develop the racial literacy skills of their candidates

and prevent teachers from relying on biased, stereotypical visual images of Black male youth, and instead make it common practice to critique the images of Black male youth presented to them in the media (Staples, 2008).

Conceptual considerations: Black males and popular visual images

Black males are particularly sensitive to their own marginalization, both in terms of race and gender. As young men of color, they are very much aware of the negative views that the larger society – including many teachers – has of them as a group. This negative sense of self translates into feelings of powerlessness which can strike at the core of a masculine identity that resists marginalization, particularly in the context of schools where most of the teaching core is composed of White women (Hopkins, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Polite & Davis, 1999). A Black male youth's resistance to this sense of powerlessness is often viewed as oppositional behavior. Hopkins notes that this resistance is often "interpreted as assertiveness, hostility, and volition. In short, the inner-city Black male is misunderstood" (1997).

Martindale (1996) reminds us that "negative stereotypes of African-Americans have been deeply ingrained in Anglo Americans since Africans were first brought to this country in chains" (p. 21). Many of these negative stereotypes were codified into the literature by film historian Donald Bogle. Using American film as his guide, Bogle describes a cast of stereotypical characters who permeate American film, and by extension American literature and society. Each character has his or her own set of unflattering characteristics and is a reflection of the images used historically to define and limit African-Americans. These include: Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies and bucks (Bogle, 1994). Different versions of the young black buck (the "savage" or the "brute") often align Black male youth with this character. As the labels imply, he is brutal, without manners, and highly sexualized.

One of the earliest film representations of this character was in the ground-breaking silent film *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), a film glorifying the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in which brutish black males (in the film White men in blackface) leered at white women. In 1988, then candidate for president of the United States, George Bush, Sr., ran a campaign advertisement designed to horrify the voting public. His campaign used the picture of a sullen Black male named Willie Horton to convince the voting public that if his opponent were elected, there would be more people like Horton on the streets committing terrible crimes.

Whether the stereotypes take the form of the leering 'Black buck' in *Birth of a Nation*; Willie Horton in campaign ads; televised references by opposing politicians to President Barack Obama as the "food stamp President," or the tragic caricatures of urban male youth with gold teeth, saggy pants, and hands cuffed behind their backs in music videos and popular films – all of these and more negative images of Black males have persisted in the public imagination. The killing of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black male who was apparently 'misread' by a community watch volunteer, resulting in Martin's death, has awakened the public's attention to this problem and anchors the critical need for racial literacy, and professional development for all teachers of Black male youth (Love, 2013).

The influence of popular film in preservice teacher education

In her article "Using Popular Films to Challenge Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Teaching in Urban Schools," Grant (2002) makes a compelling argument for the ways preservice teachers rely on popular culture, film included, to educate themselves about teaching in urban schools. Her argument is grounded in the literature on film, popular culture, and preservice teacher education. She offers an analysis of the ways in which three popular Hollywood films depicting teaching in urban schools can provide a platform for critical discourse on race, class, and culture among preservice teachers – a discourse that is desperately needed but virtually absent in most preservice education programs. Most preservice teachers who intend to teach in urban schools "may have some knowledge, understanding, and attitudes necessary for teaching urban students, but, for the most part, their backgrounds will be limited and superficial" (Fry & McKinney, 1997, p. 31). Grant (2002) also argues that one of the ways in which this "superficial" knowledge is formed is through popular culture. She writes,

> Popular culture shapes and reflects the beliefs of Americans, particularly those of young people accustomed to receiving significant amounts of visual information. When their experiences differ widely from those of inner-city youth, they rely on images in popular culture for information about worlds different from their own. These images reflect and shape assumptions with which preservice teachers enter urban classrooms and, as such, can serve as an invaluable format through which to explore these beliefs. (p. 78)

Teachers in film & beyond the bricks *documentary screening*

The data analyzed in this article are taken from research that each author conducted at their academic institution. For several years, the second author taught the preservice teacher education course *Teachers in Film* which required preservice teachers to critique Hollywood films for the messages they present about urban education. Each week, students viewed significant portions of various popular films and were asked to describe what they saw, and discuss what they believe the films said about teachers and students in urban schools. Data consist of classroom observations, verbatim comments from the students, and journals written by the students about the films and their fieldwork experiences. As we examined these data and revisited the films in preparation for writing this article, we were led by the data to focus on the opening sequences of the films and analyze what message these films were sending about Black male youth, the schools they attend, and their home communities.

As part of an Educational Documentary Screening Series, in November 2011, the first author hosted a screening of the *Beyond the Bricks* documentary on her campus. Although the event was open to the public, the screening was mandatory viewing for two cohorts of students enrolled in an English Education *Diversity* course. For classroom credit, the *Diversity* students completed a 10-item, open-ended survey that intended to capture how they processed the documentary, and what connections, if any, they made to the topics of race and urban education that were discussed in their classes and observations made in their fieldwork placements since the start of the semester. Fifty-three surveys were completed by preservice teachers. Their answers were coded for themes relating to the documentary's influence on their understanding about Black male students, and the strengths and weaknesses of the film.

Data from the *Teachers in Film* course affirmed that popular Hollywood films such as like *Boyz N the Hood, Dangerous Minds, Freedom Writers, 187, and Lean On Me* often normalize the idea that Black and Latino males create mayhem in urban schools, and the schools they attend are out of control. What follows is a cursory description and analysis of the opening sequences of the movies featured in the *Teachers in Film* course.

Boyz N the Hood (Singleton, 1991): In the opening scene three African-American children, perhaps 11 or 12 years old, walk through their neighborhood on their way to school. Their journey is framed by the worst of modern urban blight. Their conversation centers on homework and a gang related murder that occurred the night before in their neighborhood. The next sequence features a classroom in which several Black and Latino/a students are portrayed in various states of inattentiveness. After mocking a lesson about the Pilgrims, the White teacher asks the lead character (Tre) to instruct the class in a lesson of his choice. Tre chooses Africa as his topic for discussion. A fight ensues after one boy objects to the possibility that his ancestors may have originated in Africa. The next scene includes a phone conversation with Tre's mother and his White teacher. It is clear to the viewer that although the White teacher is quite sincere, she has very little understanding of the needs, interests or daily issues of her students, and misreads the interaction between Tre and his classmate.

Dangerous Minds (Smith, Simpson, & Bruckheimer, 1995): This is a fictionalized account of the memoir *My Posse Don't Do Homework* (Johnson, 1992) by former Marine, LouAnne Johnson (played by Michelle Pfeiffer), who taught an English class of Black and Latino/a students at a high school in East Palo Alto, California. The film opens with a grainy black-and-white sequence of an urban landscape: graffiti-splattered walls of a seemingly burned-out house, a bent Stop sign, a disheveled man staggering to pick up an empty can on the street, a homeless man pushing a cart past gum-chewing Black and Latino/a teenage girls as they climb onto a school bus, a man passing what looks like a small bag of white rocks through a car window and accepting cash in exchange – a drug deal.

Freedom Writers (LaGravenese, DeVito, Sher, & Shamberg, 2007): This film was based on a 1999 book by Erin Gruwell (portrayed by Hilary Swank) depicting her experience teaching writing to a high school class of mostly Black, Latino/a, and Asian children in California. The film opens with the sounds of police sirens and video footage of the 1992 uprisings in Los Angeles following the Rodney King trial (a highly publicized trial at which Los Angeles police officers were accused of brutally beating a Black male after a traffic stop): burning buildings, SWAT teams, and funerals are shown before any students are seen by the audience. When students finally appear, they seem to be the hackneyed clichés of Black and Latino/a students movie goers are accustomed to seeing in this genre.

187 (Reynolds, 1997): In this fictional drama about a high school teacher who returns to the classroom after a near-fatal stabbing by a student, the audience is led into a dreary, graffiti-scarred school building as the opening credits roll. The first piece of non-background dialog heard is "No riding in the hallway, stupid!" said with venom by a Black male youth to a teacher (the main character played by Samuel L. Jackson) who is riding his bicycle in the hallway. The very next exchange – "You a crazy nigga, G" – is uttered by another Black male student to the teacher. When Jackson's character finally enters his classroom (a science lab), he sees chaos: students overlap in conversation, curse freely at each other and the teacher, play cards, and display no interest in learning or listening to him.

Lean on Me (Avildsen & Piazzo, 1989). This film is based on the true story of the controversial principal, Joe Clark, who was applauded by many for bringing order to downtrodden urban high school mostly attended by Black and Latino students. In one of the opening scenes (shot in three minutes of real time) with the Guns and Roses song, *Welcome to the Jungle,* playing in the background, the viewer sees graffiti-splattered

walls, a toilet tossed through a window, several drug deals under way, a young woman having her clothes ripped from her body, and a fight between a hapless student and drug dealer, ultimately resulting in the school's principal having his head bashed against the ground, sending him to the hospital.

In the class session where this scene from *Lean on Me* was shown, several students said they believed the scene reflected a reality of urban schools. One student strongly defended his belief and said that the opening sequence was "common" to urban schools attended by mostly Black male students. He recalled that when he entered his preservice placement "it was about as I imagined. It was what I had seen in the film. The school was decaying, the classroom sizes were enormous, and security was everywhere."

Beyond the bricks: *a cinematic counter-narrative*

It is useful to compare the opening sequences of *Lean on Me* and the other films mentioned in this article to the opening scene of the educational documentary *Beyond the Bricks* (WashingtonKoen Media, 2009). *Beyond the Bricks* tells the story of two Black males from Newark, New Jersey who drop out but eventually find their way back in to school. The film opens in a busy hallway of Barringer High School Success Academy's 9th grade campus. Black students, with a sprinkling of Latino/a youth, populate the corridor, walking through on their way to class, lunch, homeroom, and other areas of the school. The students are fairly well-dressed, low-volume, jovial, playful with each other, and happy to mug for the camera as they pass it. The halls, although narrow, are bright; the floor tile is baby blue, and the lockers and classroom doors are clean and look new. Orange construction paper hangs on the walls framing what one can assume are the usual announcements and postings. As seen in the brief description of the opening sequences of the popular films mentioned in this article, films featuring Black and Latino students rarely open on such an unruffled note.

Hollywood films depicting urban schools tend to be formulaic: they establish a bleak landscape into which enters the students who are reliably loud, unruly, disrespectful, and disinterested in learning. By stark contrast, director Derek Koen (2009) opens *Beyond the Bricks* by placing his camera at the end of the hallway against traffic so that students are moving forward, not milling aimlessly or chaotically. Soon one young man appears at the top of the screen, standing still amid the flow of students. The camera zooms in to introduce Shaquiel – an adorable young man wearing wire-frame glasses. As the hallway empties, Shaquiel remains, still smiling into the camera as Koen's voiceover starts. Koen asks Shaquiel if he thinks he's smart. "I think I'm smart," Shaquiel answers definitively – the first words of the film and uncharacteristically positive ones for most films about Black and Latino/a students in urban schools.

Sleeter (1993) makes the case that media, nightly news and news magazines in particular, promote negative stereotypical images about students of color which influences teachers to adopt culturally deviant and deficit perspectives about them. She writes, "The media frequently connected African-Americans and Latinos with social problems that many Americans regarded as the result of moral depravity; drug use; teenage pregnancy; and unemployment" (p. 160). A number of studies and analyses (Ladson-Billings, 2005; McIntyre, 1997; Sleeter, 1993) confirm the tendency of many preservice teachers to adopt these myths and stereotypes about

students of color, particularly Black boys. Su (2011) maintain that these misrepresentations of students of color directly result in how they are treated in schools. They contend, "The rampant and patent misrepresentations of inner-city students in the popular media strategically obscures more nuanced views of what they are really like, what they want, and what they aspire to" (p. 152). To further this point, Steve (all names are pseudonyms), a White male preservice teacher in the *Teachers in Film* course drew on the images of the popular films shown in class to help him make sense of an experience with one of his Black male students. Steve said about Morris:

> When he first saw me sitting in his class and observing, he was amazed. "Who is this guy, and what is he doing here in my classroom?" It was understandable. On my first two days, I made the mistake of wearing a blazer and nice trousers. I looked as white bread as casual shirts, and Morris noticed this as well. I was a cooler guy to him.

During a class discussion, Steve admitted that a scene from the movie *Freedom Writers* – when Erin switches from wearing suits and expensive pearls to school, to wearing jeans, tee shirts, and no jewelry – inspired him to change how he dressed when visiting his field placement. Steve's possible misreading of Morris was based on stereotypes found in a Hollywood movie. Through his words and actions, Steve manifested cultural deficit notions by maintaining that "wearing a blazer and nice trousers" was a "mistake" when teaching Morris and his classmates.

Preservice teachers' responses to *beyond the bricks*

Films about education or films depicting urban schools and classrooms have an allure in teacher education. In part, they offer a possible glimpse into what life as a teacher may be like for those who have not yet worked in the classroom. Not only can preservice teachers get a glimpse from these films about what life may be like in urban public schools, they can also learn a lot about what is not true. To explore how the documentary *Beyond the Bricks* influences preservice teachers' reading of Black males in schools, the primary author conducted a survey with 53 English Education preservice teachers after screening the documentary. Respondents were diverse in race (Black, Asian, White, Latino, Biracial), age (from 22 to 33 years old), and gender (42 females, 11 males). Applying features of Staples' (2008) critical literacy work framework provides a method for analyzing how students can watch, listen, and question media critically. A significant finding from the survey, not unlike the students in the *Teachers in Film* course, was that most preservice teachers used popular films to help formulate their understanding of Black males in schools. We also found among the survey responses a lack of critical questioning about the images presented to students. Responding to the survey question "What questions do you have after the watching this film?", some preservice teachers wrote:

- How can I, a white female educator, help black males succeed in high school? (Yana)
- This is clearly a national emergency. We do need a blueprint – and a method for sharing our findings and successes with students. Films like this help that cause. (Jeannette)

- This film gave me the perspective of the boys! I loved that the film emphasized their perspective. (Annette)

Equally significant and oftentimes overlooked are the voices of preservice teachers born outside of The United States. After viewing the documentary, Edenye wrote,

> As a new education student, and a person who is moving to the U.S. a week ago from Ethiopia, the film gives me some lesson about how it feels to be a black man in the U.S. and the kind of opportunity as a student I have.

Seejoon, a student teacher from Korea, wrote, "I believe that through this kind of documentary, we can make change happen on a wider scale." Seejoon focused on the elements of the film that highlighted educational inequities for Black male students, but without deeper conversations about realistic ways to effect such change, there is a risk that Seejoon, and many other preservice teachers, can become discouraged shortly after entering the classroom when the issues seem too large to tackle.

Aiden, a White male preservice teacher, asked, "What concrete steps can we take as teachers, policymakers, etc. that support black males to promote a love of learning among this critical population?" Aiden's comment suggests that Black males are in a perpetual state of "crisis" and a "love of learning" does not exist among them. A White respondent who chose to remain anonymous wrote, What stands out to me about this film is the disparity of black males and their troubled homes. My questions are: how can the dysfunctional parents be reached? How can non-black teachers be convinced to value non-white students? and what can be done to change media presentation of Black males and minorities in general?" Most comments on the survey were based on stereotypes about Black male students even though *Beyond the Bricks* is a film that presents challenges as well as solutions to some of the problems Black male students face in their schools and communities. Our research shows that popular visual images in film which present positive examples of Black male youth *still* require scaffolding and critical conversations on race and inequality. Teacher educators must help their preservice students untangle their opinions and what they believe as "knowledge" about their Black male students. The findings from the *Beyond the Bricks* survey and the *Teachers in Film* course confirm the power of film to incite this critical conversation and potentially transform the ways in which Black students (and their families) are read. The survey data would have benefitted from follow-up discussions with the preservice teachers and further application of Staples' (2008) framework, particularly the elements that incited critical imagination and discussion.

Popular films, such as the ones briefly described in this article, present gross distortions of reality, even when they claim to depict real events.The chaos and raw violence that greets the viewer in the opening scenes of the movies mentioned in this paper can leave the uncritical viewer believing that what they viewed was just another "average day" in an urban school. Discussing and deconstructing Hollywood films about urban students ad schools not only gives preservice teachers the opportunity to interrogate the role that race and racism play in our public understanding of urban schools, it also provides an opportunity for them to discern myth from reality. Not having critical conversations with preservice teachers about popular visual images, including those found in films and documentaries about urban schools, can contribute to the (mis)reading of Black males in school.

The (Mis)reading of Black male youth

This current research and previous research has shown that popular film images have a huge influence on how preservice teachers interact with students of color (Grant, 2002; Trier, 2001). Movies that feature young Black males as out-of-control gangsters etch powerful negative images into viewers' minds. These images influence the perceptions that teachers have about their students, and imagining them as dangerous (similar to characters played in popular film) supports the existence of school policies that lead to a school-to-prison pipeline for these students. For example, many American schools have adopted punitive, "zero tolerance" policies, sending disproportionate numbers of young people of color into what is commonly called "the school to prison pipeline." Born out of belief that there was a need to better control student behavior, the "pipeline" begins with suspensions for minor offenses (wearing a hat, talking back, texting on a cell phone) and often ends with expulsion and arrest. In New York City, for instance, Black youth are 14 times more likely to be arrested for school-based incidents than White students and Hispanic youth are five more times likely to be arrested than their White peers (New York Times, 2013). According to West-Olatunji and Baker (2006), disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of Black boys in school are, in part, the products of a "cultural clash" between the boys and their White teachers. The result is that, although Black boys represent just under 15% of the overall public school population, "as a group they were expelled, suspended, and subjects of corporal punishment at rates 23, 21, and 27%, respectively" (p. 3).

These statistics represent a school system's equivalent of "stop and frisk" practices, where mostly innocent young boys of color are stopped and frisked by law enforcement authorities, and "stand-your-ground" laws, such as the one that resulted in the death of Trayvon Martin. These practices of disproportional punishment and control are natural pathways to prisons and the criminal justice system, often referred to as the School-to-Prison Pipeline. It is important that parents, teachers, administrators, and Black students themselves reject this narrative of unworthiness and assumed culpability.

In her book *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Ferguson (2000) describes an early interaction in her fieldwork experience at a predominantly Black urban elementary school:

> Soon after I began fieldwork at Rosa Parks elementary school, one of the adults, an African-American man, pointed to a black boy who walked by us in the hallway. "That one has a jail-cell with his name on," he told me. We were looking at a ten year old, barely four feet tall, whose frail body was shrouded in baggy pants and a hooded sweatshirt. The boy, Lamar, passed with the careful tread of someone who was in no hurry to get where he was going. He was on his way to the Punishing Room of the school. (p. 1)

Ferguson suggests that such expectations for young Black males contribute to their stigmatization and over-regulation, and that Lamar's future had already been pre-determined in the minds of others, including his teachers, in ways that would affect how the broader community responds to him. There are ways in which preservice and inservice teachers can learn to (re)read their students, and in the process provide ways for their students to re(author) some of the images they see about themselves (Staples, 2008, 2012; Staples & Troutman, 2010). Nearly two decades ago, Literacy organizations such as the National Council for Teachers of English,

and the Literacy Research Association (formerly International Reading Association (1996) are clear on the need and benefits of teaching popular film to students:

> Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television .... Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts...is another essential compo- nent of the English language arts curriculum. Visual communication is part of the fabric of contemporary life. (p. 5)

Not only is it important for preservice teachers to learn how to critique Hollywood films and other media for stereotypes and misreadings, it is just as important to present them with documentary films that offer a more balanced perspective of Black male youth and their communities for this critical examination.

Ways of (Re)reading Black male youth in film

A canon of literature critiques the representation of Black youth in urban school dramas that is useful for preservice teachers. Scholars such as Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones (2009), Bulman (2005), Grant (2002), and Trier (2001) have done interesting work examining these films and media in general for what they claim represents the typical urban classroom. Nasir et al. (2009) make the compelling argument that mass media, popular film included, offers very few identity choices which Black youth can actually embrace; "for African-American youth, media images reinforce stereotypes of these groups as potentially dangerous, anti intellectual, and downtrodden" (p. 78).

Although some aspects of these films unfortunately reify stereotypes about Black men and youth that we argue against in this article, like Grant (2002), we see the potential of using these films with preservice teachers to engage them in discussion about their perceptions of and attitudes toward Black male students and as a viable resource to build racial literacy. In providing illustrations of media projects that portray negative stereotypical images of Black males, as well as positive ones, we argue that both portrayals represent powerful learning tools.

There is tremendous value in the rare cinematic structure used in *Beyond the Bricks*; two young Black male students give their side of the story and have their points-of-view honored. This structure also differs radically from films about Black urban students that are meant to glorify the teacher, where the storylines become evidence of the protagonist teacher's superior pedagogy and perseverance. Grant (2002) offers keen insight into this cinematic approach and notes, "Successful teaching in these films is portrayed as the receiving of love and adoration from students, not in the improved quality of students' lives as a result of their education" (p. 85). In *Beyond the Bricks*, Shaquiel and Erick clearly love the adults who show concern about them, but it is also clear that the students' academic achievement is the main priority in the relationships.

There are additional ways that preservice teachers can engage in a critical analysis of popular visual images, including film. Grant (2002) discusses how preservice teachers can examine films by questioning authenticity, motivation, student-teacher relationships, the role of teacher authority in the classroom, parent involvement, and myths about urban students' cultures.

Bridging the divide in preservice teacher education: a call for racial literacy

Preservice teachers who have not received cultural competence training, been taught culturally responsive pedagogical strategies, or experienced racial literacy development (Bolgatz, 2005; Rogers & Moseley, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011; Skerrett, 2011) in their teacher education programs may continue to misread Black males. We uphold that preservice teacher education programs must grapple with this question: How can teacher candidates "read" African-American male youth in ways that inform promising teaching practices? We contend that preservice teachers must be reminded that

> constructs such as black masculinity, linguistically fixed, and juridically codified as they are, have become invisible stories perpetuated throughout the history of the United States. Pejorative narratives of Black males as lazy, violent, disengaged – first offered to justify slavery – continue to significantly impact the ways in which Black males are understood and in many ways understand themselves. (Johns, 2007, p. 62)

Moreover, teacher candidates must be given space to discuss theories and ways in which the socially constructed, media-driven image of the Black male impacts their views of Black men and youth. They must be given space to sort out how these views might negatively reflect their practice and discuss concrete ways to work against embracing these negative views as universal truths. Regarding school personnel and Black males students, Toldson & Lewis (2012) assert,

> the idea that Black males are completely disaffected, and beyond any reasonable efforts to remediate is an attitude that we frequently encounter when we train school leaders and educational administrators. The cynicism and apathy among people who work with Black boys are far more threatening to our future than the Black male issues so ominously dramatized in the media. (p. 12)

Mahiri (1998) argues that parents and school professionals must "resist" this narrative and replace it with a narrative of self-worth and meaning. He asserts,

> so, rather than seeing African-American or youth cultural constructs statically, recognition is given to how their fluid and mutable qualities can contribute to the play of difference and change in society and, as I want to argue, in schools. (p. 3)

Staples (2008) co-created with her students a method to critique popular culture narratives that relate to Black male identity construction. Regarding the need for a "reauthoring" technique she notes, "African-American men are continually represented in popular culture narratives in detrimental ways. Too often my students read films that portray Black men as criminally minded, ignorant, hyper-sexed individuals with little regard for community, family, or self-improvement" (p. 383). If preservice teachers are not taught ways to interrogate their biases about Black males; if they are not encouraged to look for the best and highest in their students of color, particularly their Black male students who are so maligned in the media and society, they will not be equipped to help them students critique popular visual images, resist and re (author) stereotypes about them. Staples (2012) observed a group of Black adolescents as they engaged media in an urban afterschool program. Her research describes the ways in which these students responded to media images of Black masculinity and how they read popular culture narratives (PCNs). Popular culture narratives, as defined by Staples are media texts such as films, videos, television programs, Internet websites, blogs, urban or street fiction, and popular periodicals (Staples, 2008). Her

students critiqued PCNs based on their lived experiences, and their "understanding of blackness and its social (in)significance" (p. 56).

We submit that film analysis is a viable way to begin to build racial literacy in preservice teachers. Developing racial literacy requires teacher education students to engage in meaningful conversation about teaching in urban schools. Racial literacy, as we defined it at the beginning of this article, is informed by scholarship that recognizes race as a signifier that is: discursively constructed through language (Hall, 1997); fluid, unstable, and socially constructed (Omi & Winant, 1986), rather than static; and not rooted in biology but having "real" effects in the lives of individuals (Frankenberg, 1996). Guinier's (2004) work implores a shift from racial liberalism to racial literacy; while other scholars grapple with the invisibility of race in classroom settings (Bolgatz, 2005; Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, 2005; Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Guerrero, 2008) and communities (Winndance, 2003). Guinier (2004) critiques racial liberalism as an inactive, deficit approach to racial equality that subjugates Blacks to the position of victim, and does not enforce the required anti-racist stance that Whites must take against their own racist ideals and actions. Guinier cites the historic 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* court case as one of the most ineffective racial liberalism projects in our history – a case that commanded national and international attention, but did not change much on the ground for Black people in the US Guinier reminds us that "racial literacy depends upon the engagement between thought and action …. It is about learning rather than knowing. It is a project that is an interactive process in which race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment" (pp. 114–115).

Racial literacy requires familiarity with unconscious bias (Moule, 2009) as well as an understanding of structural racism. It demands a far more nuanced approach than typical charges of racism or race-carding (Diallo, 2010). Twine (2003) conceptualizes racial literacy as a project utilizing concrete artifacts (social practices). In her work with White parents, Twine notes how their social practices made up the "invisible labor" (p. 900) of anti-racist movements. The parents in her study paid particular attention to their White privilege and exercised it in support of anti-racist measures. In another study involving preservice teachers, in a book club featuring books in which White characters struggle with racism and White privilege as part of a literacy methods course, Rogers and Mosley (2006) employed discourse analysis methods to describe how their African-American and European American students used talk, writing, and action to "work together to construct particular meanings" – what they refer to as "racial literacies" (p. 108). These researchers focused their analysis specifically on the strain between their participants' talk and action. They found that racial literacy requires action – discussion of racial issues, reading and writing about racial issues, and, when necessary, the interruption of racist acts. The *Teachers in Film* course provides an example of racial literacy skill building in action. It requires students to identify, own, critique, and eventually alter negative perceptions about people (in this case the students they work with) based on race. Respondents to the *Beyond the Bricks* survey began a crucial step in racial literacy skill building – they started to identify and own their ideas about Black male youth.

In her article on racial literacy in teacher education, Sealey-Ruiz and Greene (2011) presents a framework to assess racial literacy development, and in other work offers ways in which racial literacy helps preservice teachers resist School-to-Prison-Pipeline practices found in many urban schools. A teacher education program that

fosters racial literacy must provide spaces for teachers to talk about their fears and uncertainties in embracing this type of pedagogy.

Toward a racial literacy in preservice teacher education

Embracing racial literacy in preservice teacher education is a strategy designed to confront the numbing cycle of dysconscious racism in our schools and celebrate success in Black male youth. It is a call to end the silence that pervades our conversations about race. Our silence serves only to reinforce our ignorance of the needs of African-American students, thereby perpetuating the inequities that lead to poor school achievement and crowded prisons. Schools of education can embrace the following tenets as they move their students toward deep self-reflection, an equity mindset, and development of racial literacy. To that end, teacher education programs must encourage preservice teacher candidates to:

- Engage the reading of critical texts (visual images (including films), songs, writings about race, racism, diversity, etc.) across the curriculum as a method of acquiring language to discuss, problematize, and refute racial stereotypes and racist hierarchical systems in society and in their schools.
- Understand that prior to becoming culturally-competent and culturally-responsive teachers, they must engage in self-examination around notions of race as constructed for Black children, and other children of color.
- Recognize the need for *and* accept the task of holding students accountable for practicing racial literacy in their teacher education classrooms, and the classrooms where they will observe and teach.
- Discuss and critique personal experiences with race and racism. This is an essential component of developing racial literacy.
- Explore their own racial and class identities, particularly as they relate to notions of White Privilege. Because of their future role in the identity development of children, preservice teachers need to develop a consciousness about their own racial identity and consider how they can support positive racial identity development in their students.
- Take a stand against racist or discriminatory practices that cause negative outcomes for their Black students and other students of color in the schools where they will ultimately teach.

After building racial literacy, what's next?

Teach them the game so they know their position,
So they can grow and make decisions that change the world and break old traditions.
They put kids in jail for a life they didn't even get to start is murder too
And it's breaking my heart. It's breaking our nation apart.
We gave the youth all of the anger. It's just we ain't taught them how to express it.
And so it's dangerous.
You can't talk to them unless your language is relating to what they're going through.
You're so busy ignoring them you can't see what they showing you.
(from "Joy" Kweli, 2002)

As teacher educators, we believe in the promise of racial literacy development in preservice teacher education. Therefore, as preservice teachers build their confidence

in relating to and reading their Black male students, we must ask: What's next? What might an authentic "reading" of Black male youth look like? How can preservice teachers envision themselves as conduits for change and powerful learning? How can they invite all students, and particularly their Black male students, to the learning table?

One specific way to start answering these questions is to help preservice teachers understand they need not reject or try to separate African-American children from their culture. As Gilyard (1991) notes, "school education can only be a widespread success ... when teachers stop assuming that students are inferior and/or have nothing to contribute to the educative process other than sit and absorb" (p. 165). In this particular context, teachers and teacher educators should embrace and infuse the cultural elements of African-American children's lives into public school curricula and instructional strategies. To do so, one can start to help preservice teachers find value in their Black male students as Americans and citizens of the world. Another approach is to help preservice teachers gain an appreciation for what youth of color bring to the classroom. Whether unintentionally or most deliberately, the larger American community has tried to distance itself from African-American youth, and urban youth in particular (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011). Preservice teachers can to be taught to show the sophistication and caring needed to sort out what is good about what youth value, and cultivate the language, patience, and courage to discuss with young people the more undesirable elements of what they may value (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011).

Preservice teachers can be taught that their presence in communities of color makes a difference, and as their students see them outside of the classroom, new opportunities open for building relationships between schools and the communities they serve (Hopkins, 1997; Howard, 1999). Many urban schools turn into ghost towns after the last bell rings. For educators, valuing Black male youth means valuing the communities in which they live. Programs should encourage preservice educators to walk the streets and greet community members, patronize community businesses, and they attend church services (Seidl, 2007). These simple acts not only demonstrate a recognition of our shared humanity, but also serve to diminish the aura of privilege and power often attributed to White teachers.

Preservice teachers must have clinical experiences that demonstrate how teachers help their students feel good about themselves and thus help them develop the habits they need to succeed. Preservice teachers who have an understanding of the issues confronting their students will be less likely to say and do harmful things to their students. However, preservice teachers who have internalized myths and stereotypes about the very students they will teach are potential dangers. How can those who do not think racism is a problem relate to their students of color, and particularly their Black males students? We must understand the dispositions preservice teachers have about Black male students *before* they begin to teach. When schools can finally treat the lives and history of African-Americans as valid and integral parts of the American socio-cultural landscape, then the self-worth that African-American children can feel will no longer be in jeopardy. Such a shift is not solely for the benefit of Black youth, but for everyone who is concerned about education. Preservice teachers must be encouraged to see difference as a valuable facet, not a deficit, of our national mindset. Until this happens, America's schools and many of its teachers will regard a vital portion of their students as flawed and failed.

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